

Looking at Trajan's Column: from imperial power to divine inspiration

Jessica Hughes

Long after all the famous Roman Emperors were dead and gone, a Christian pope named Gregory the Great was walking one afternoon through the city of Rome, lost in holy thoughts. When he got to the ancient imperial fora he paused to look up at the column of Trajan, which was then – as it still is now – covered from top to bottom with pictures of that emperor's wars in the Roman province of Dacia. The scenes of bloodshed and sacrifice depicted on the column were worlds away from the new Christian Rome that Gregory occupied, but, nevertheless, the column made an astonishing impact on him. His eye rested on a detail which showed an old woman pleading desperately with the Emperor Trajan for justice after the death of her son in battle. A bystander explained the scene to Gregory – Trajan had initially turned a deaf ear to the woman's complaints, but she continued with her pleas until finally he took pity on her and dispensed justice on the spot. This story left Gregory in emotional turmoil – Trajan had clearly been a kind and just leader, but, according to the church's law, as a pagan he was condemned all the same to go to hell. The pope stumbled back to St Peter's in tears, and only when he was in his private quarters did a heavenly voice boom out. Thanks to Gregory's prayers, the Emperor Trajan would be pardoned! This may be a medieval legend, but it provides one particularly potent example of how the column of Trajan, and the scenes sculpted on it, have captured the imagination of visitors to the city ever since the column was dedicated in A.D. 113, and have been constantly rewritten into new stories.

Trajan in Dacia and Rome

The column's mastermind was born Marcus Ulpius Traianus in the province of Spain in A.D. 53. The son of a Roman consul, he rose through the ranks of the Roman army until he was finally 'adopted' as heir by the Emperor Nerva in A.D. 98. When Nerva died, Trajan took over as Emperor, and devoted himself to expanding the Empire through endless wars and conquests (although many people whispered that he was more concerned with personal glory than with the good of Rome). Only three years after his accession, Trajan set out on his campaigns in Dacia, the area across the river Danube, modern-day Romania. After two long and difficult wars Trajan emerged victorious, with Dacia incorporated as a province into the Roman Empire. The column's marble images may in fact have been modelled on the war commentaries that we know were written by Trajan (or a hard-worked secretary) on the front. These commentaries don't survive any more, but in style they were probably very similar to the *Gallic Wars* written by Julius Caesar, which (as well as recounting the ups and downs of the battle) describe the foreign land and the outlandish customs of the enemy, how they dressed, ate, and spoke. We can imagine that such texts would have been read avidly back in Rome, by people who were far away from the scene of action.

When Trajan returned to Rome, he embarked on a different kind of war – this time, the victory he coveted was over the hearts and minds of the Roman people. His imperial predecessors, like

Augustus, had shown that one of the best ways for a ruler to win fame and respect amongst friends and enemies alike was by building spectacular monuments. Trajan had brought back plenty of war booty from Dacia, and he used this to fund his masterpiece, a wonderful forum, which outdid those of earlier emperors in both size and splendour, and which had the 30-metre tall column as its centrepiece. Today it can be difficult to get a true feel of the size and shape of Trajan's forum, especially since the modern road made by the Italian leader Mussolini cuts right through the middle of the excavations. Many of the original buildings are gone, or survive only as crumbly remains. But writers from the time assure us that Trajan's forum was 'far beyond description, and not again to be rivalled by mortal men', and when the Eastern emperor Constantius visited Rome in A.D. 357 and entered Trajan's forum, we hear that he stood dumbstruck in amazement.

Making Trajan's forum

The inscription at the base of Trajan's column proclaims that the very top of the column marks the height that the ground used to be – that is, before Trajan scooped into the hill to level out the enormous floor of his forum. The amount of physical labour that this required (especially in the age before JCBs) is mind-boggling. In his *Satires*, the Roman poet Juvenal describes watching the frenzied construction of this forum. The noise is deafening, the workers' tunics rip – and in a rather gruesome passage he points out the serious dangers posed by construction on this scale: 'If there is a broken axle of some truck carrying Carrara marble, and the whole load is poured down over the passers-by – will there be anything left at all of their bodies? Who could find their bones and limbs? Every corpse has been squashed flat and disappeared – just like their souls.' Juvenal may be exaggerating somewhat for poetic effect, but his words hint that even at the stages of its construction, the forum of Trajan had a huge impact on the lives of ordinary people in Rome. This was all the more true once the forum had been finished. It came complete with basilica, libraries, and markets bigger than any seen in Rome before. It was almost a small city in itself! Shopping, law cases, studying, gossiping – all facets of a person's life were now acted out in the shadow of the column, which was topped by a shining gold image of their emperor, Trajan.

Looking at the column

The size and grandeur of Trajan's forum clearly boasted the creativity and resources of Rome, which must have seemed all the greater when contrasted with the Dacia we see illustrated on the column – a rather sad, empty place, with only a few ramshackle huts to break up the barren landscape. From top to bottom, Trajan's column proclaims the unbeatable strength of the Roman army and the unambiguous defeat of its enemy. The

base of the column is a large rectangle of marble, already at least twice the height of a tall adult, which is decorated with images of the weapons stripped from enemy soldiers dying on the battlefield. Directly above the base, Trajan's story begins. The circular shaft of the column is carved with pictures 'in relief' (this means that the figures remain firmly attached to the stone background, like painted figures on a canvas). The action is not arranged into separate scenes, but it unfolds continuously along what seems like one enormous strip of stone, 'wrapped' around the column. Many people have compared this long spiral to an ancient scroll, and it may indeed have been the case that the scenes were originally drawn on a roll of parchment, and then transposed onto the monument. The relief has also been compared to a cinematic film reel: the Emperor appears in over 50 different 'shots', and is backed by a cast of almost 2,500 extras. And just like a modern-day film studio, the column's designers could also swiftly 'edit' the bits of the story where the Romans didn't come off so well, or look so glamorous. In the fictional *Memoirs of Hadrian*, written by the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar, Trajan's successor Hadrian remembers the horrible hardships of fighting in Dacia under Trajan's command, remarking cynically that 'My post on the frontiers had shown me an aspect of victory which does not appear on Trajan's column.'

The action starts at the bottom of the column, with a scene of the Roman army crossing the Danube river into Dacia. The artists have depicted the god of the river rising up out of the water to watch their arrival. You can see from his size that he is not an ordinary mortal man – his head and upper body alone are bigger than any one of the soldiers that march past him. The god's expression is serious, but he does nothing to stop the Roman soldiers, who march on up the column to wreak havoc amongst the powerless Dacians. We see the Romans alter the very contours of the Dacian landscape – they cut through forests and destroy houses and fortifications, replacing them with camps, roads, and bridges. Scenes of violence are performed with gusto, each one anticipating the moment at the top of the column when the troops bring Trajan the ultimate trophy of war – the head of the Dacian leader Decebalus.

'Bringing it all back home'?

Trajan's Column played a crucial role in sharing some of the experience of victory with the people at home in Rome. After all, this new land belonged officially to them – Trajan had (supposedly) conquered in the name of Rome, and, more importantly, their taxes had paid for the battles! Trajan's written accounts of the wars had brought the Roman people closer to their newly-won territory by describing it to them. Trajan's Column went one step further, and actually showed the people back home in Rome what the province of Dacia and its inhabitants looked like. But how much of the victory did the column really share with the people in Rome? Barely any of its details were actually visible in Roman times. Our books of photographs give us the opportunity to scrutinize the carvings, but in reality nothing much above the scene with the river god would have ever been seen by the ancient passer-by. A few lucky observers in the buildings which flanked the column in antiquity may have got a closer view of some parts of the column. But these buildings were libraries, and only a small sector of Roman society, the educated elite, would have been allowed to enter to peruse the collections of books and glance out of the windows. And in a way, all the intricate details of the exotic Dacian landscape, and the strange people who inhabited it, only served to remind the average viewer that they had never been to Dacia – or anywhere quite like it. The column's message was clear – the Emperor and his army were the only ones who had actually seen Dacia first hand, and they were the only ones who had the ability to transmit (or withhold) this knowledge to those waiting at home. If information is power, then Trajan's Column made the

Emperor pretty much untouchable.

Finally, according to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, the column was also intended to provide a last resting place for Trajan and his loved ones. Buried underneath the column, his ashes inside a golden urn, Marcus Ulpius Traianus, 'warrior king', would always and forever be associated with the glory he had won in the far-off land of Dacia.

Jessica Hughes is a research associate at Cambridge University working on the Leverhulme-funded project Changing beliefs of the human body.